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Why are People so Obedient? – Compliance and Tyranny

“And the word “courage” should be reserved to characterize the man or woman who leaves the infantile sanctuary of the mass mind.”

Sam Keen, Fire in the Belly

In the privacy of our minds many of us disagree with the ideologies, political agendas, and government mandates of our day, yet in public we comply. We do what we are told, say what is politically correct, and justify our hypocrisy by telling ourselves that we are powerless to change society, and so we might as well blend in with the crowd. In this video, we explain why publicly conforming to what we privately disagree with makes us complicit in tyranny, and why each of us has far more power to influence society than we have been led to believe.

In the 1950s, the social psychologist Solomon Asch conducted an experiment which demonstrated the degree to which individuals will reject what they think is true in order to conform to the majority. In the experiment, Asch showed a test subject two cards. On the first card was a single line, and on the second card were three lines, A, B, and C, with only line C being the same length as the line on the first card. Asch instructed the test subject to state which line on the second card was the same length as the line on the first card. However, before the test subject gave an answer, they witnessed 7 confederates – or individuals who were in on the experiment – state that line B was the same length as the line on the first card. Rather than state the obvious truth, the test subjects gave the same wrong answer as the group 37% of the time, and of the 123 test subjects who took part in this experiment, two thirds went along with the group at least once. Asch’s experiment confirms what philosophers have been reiterating for thousands of years: for most human beings conforming to what others say and do – no matter how objectively false or absurd – takes precedence over adapting to reality and discovering the truth. In reflecting on Asch’s experiment, the psychologist Todd Rose explains:

“...we care about being in the numerical majority even when we don’t necessarily care about the group and even when the group opinion is merely an illusion. Acting on instinct, in social situations our brains don’t actually bother to make the distinction between appearance and reality...Even in the absence of intentional pressure or incentives, we like to go along with what we think is the consensus because, quite simply, we’re biologically wired to do so.”

Todd Rose, Collective Illusions

Our inclination to go along with what we think is the consensus makes us vulnerable to propaganda and easily manipulated. For one of the primary ways that governments, corporations, and global institutions influence public opinion and shape mass behavior is by manufacturing illusions of consensus. They harness the power of the mainstream media and social media for the express purpose of making it seem as if the majority supports certain agendas, ideologies, and mandates. Slanted narratives, biased reports, rhetoric that appeals to emotion, misleading “fact checks”, outright lies, dubious opinion polls, and social bots are some of the weapons used in this subtle form of psychological warfare. Todd Rose heads an organization which investigates the misconceptions that people hold regarding what is the consensus on social and political issues, and as he explains:

“Name anything that truly matters to you, and I’ll wager that you are flat-out wrong about what the majority of people really think about at least half of them. And that’s being generous.”

Todd Rose, Collective Illusions

These illusions of consensus lead many of us to censor our real opinions, and to comply with socially destructive agendas and ideologies. Todd Rose references a study conducted in July of 2020 which revealed that nearly two thirds of Americans are not comfortable voicing their political opinions in public. But to make matters worse, when others see us conforming in public, they assume that we agree with what we are conforming to, and this heightens their inclination to conform and opens the door for collective illusions to form and spread throughout society. Or as Todd Rose explains:

“Collective illusions are social lies. They occur in situations where a majority of individuals in a group privately reject a particular opinion, but they go along with it because they (incorrectly) assume that most other people accept it. The result is a pernicious, self-fulfilling prophecy. By making blind and ultimately false assumptions about the opinions of those around us and worrying that we are in the minority, we become more likely to perpetuate the very views we and others do not hold. Worse, because the very same people who disagree with the status quo are the ones enforcing it, it becomes all but impossible to dismantle the illusion.”

Todd Rose, Collective Illusions

Collective illusions play a critical role in the rise and solidification of tyranny. To illustrate how this dynamic plays out, and how it can be stopped, we can turn to the allegory of the greengrocer from Vaclav Havel’s book, *The Power of the Powerless*.

In Communist Czechoslovakia, there was a man who sold fruit and vegetables in a corner store. Each morning he hung a government-endorsed sign in the window which read “Workers of the World, Unite!”. The greengrocer did not believe in the message of the sign – to him it was nothing more than cliché propaganda. After decades of harsh political oppression, it was clear to him that the government’s alleged concern for the workers of the world was an ideological front to conceal their thirst for power. Yet even though the greengrocer knew that the sign was propaganda, each morning he hung the sign anyways, because that’s what everyone else did. Government-endorsed signs hung in the window of every shop; they formed a part of what Vaclav Havel called “the panorama of everyday life” which helped to create, and sustain, the collective illusion that the majority supported the government. And it was this collective illusion of consensus, more than any other factor, which secured mass compliance. Or as Timothy Snyder explains in the Introduction to *The Power of the Powerless*:

“The greengrocer hangs his sign not because he receives an order, but because he sees that others do likewise. Others, in turn, follow his example. The system is totalitarian not because some individual has total power, but because power is shared in conditions of total irresponsibility.”

Timothy Snyder, Introduction to The Power of the Powerless

Or as Havel explained:

“...without the greengrocer’s slogan the office worker’s slogan could not exist, and vice versa...by exhibiting their slogans, each compels the other to accept the rules of the game and to confirm thereby the power that requires the slogans in the first place. Quite simply, each helps the other to be obedient...In the totalitarian system everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

One day, the greengrocer decided he was sick of supporting an authoritarian government, and so he stopped hanging the sign in his window. What is more, he stopped voting in what he considered to be farcical elections, stopped regurgitating government propaganda, and started to publicly express his real opinions. These seemingly simple acts initiated a remarkable ripple effect, for as Todd Rose writes:

“...surprisingly, with amazing speed, the greengrocer began to gain support for the simple reason that everyone else in the city felt exactly the same way he did. Tired of living under oppression, the tailor and the baker and the office worker followed his lead. The moment the greengrocer stopped cooperating, he sent a signal to everyone else that they could do likewise.”

Todd Rose, Collective Illusions

The story of the greengrocer is a personification allegory; he represents all the individuals in communist Czechoslovakia whose noncompliant actions helped destroy the collective illusion of consensus support upon which the entire edifice of tyranny was built. The destruction of this collective illusion culminated in the Velvet Revolution, one of the only historical occurrences of a peaceful revolution which toppled an oppressive regime. How this revolution came to be, and how it achieved such profound political change in just 11 days, puzzles some historians. However, what

is often overlooked is the fact that the seeds of this revolution were planted in the years prior by all the unsung heroes of Czechoslovakia whose behavior was patterned in accordance with the allegory of the greengrocer. Or as Vaclav Havel explained:

“By breaking the rules of the game [of tyranny], the greengrocer disrupted the game... He exposed it as a mere game... He said that the emperor is naked. And because the emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous happened: by his action, the greengrocer... enabled everyone to peer behind the curtain. He showed everyone that it is possible to live within the truth.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

As highly social beings, what we say and do influences the people we encounter, and even minor displays of noncompliance and nonconformity have the power to ripple outward and initiate a butterfly effect that changes society in dramatic ways. Hence why Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn stated that a single individual speaking the truth could bring down a tyranny, or as Henry Melvill observed:

“Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results.”

Henry Melvill

Some of us, however, face economic, social, or physical repercussions for being too forthright in our beliefs. If the consequences of living fully in the truth are too severe, Rose recommends the strategy of sowing seeds of doubt in the minds of others, or as he explains:

“For example, you can say something like, “I haven’t made up my mind yet” or “On the one hand, I can see the value of x, but on the other...” You can also suggest other options by saying things like “I have a friend who...” or “I read somewhere that...” Doing this gives you plausible deniability while retaining your sense of control. It also offers an escape hatch for others who have been afraid to speak up. Often all it takes is a single spark of ambivalence or mixed opinion. Once you crack open the door, others can gain the courage to follow.”

Todd Rose, Collective Illusions

If, on the other hand, we adopt hypocrisy as a way of life and fully comply with political agendas, ideologies, and mandates which we do not agree with, then we will not only be a victim of the creeping tyranny that is suffocating our society, but also an active supporter. Referring to the government-endorsed lies which the majority of citizens in communist Czechoslovakia complied with, Vaclav Havel wrote:

“Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless